

MIGRANTS' AGENCY AND MOBILISATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS: LONDON'S LATIN AMERICAN COMMUNITY NAVIGATING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

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Migrants' Agency and Mobilisation in Times of Crisis:

London's Latin American Community

Navigating the Impact of Covid-19

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Abstract

This discussion paper contributes to the understanding of how migrants collectively organise to cope with new crises by examining how London's Latin American community mobilised to address the impact of Covid-19. We draw on fieldwork conducted between June 2020 and June 2023 for three projects: (1) a doctoral study exploring the experiences of 51 Colombian parents who onward migrated from Spain to London after the 2008 crisis; (2) a participatory research project on the impact of Covid-19 and Brexit on 73 Latin Americans in London; and (3) a mixed-methods evaluation of an initiative established by a London-based Latin American charity during the peak of the pandemic to reduce barriers to healthcare. We identified three main types of Latin American-led community responses to mitigate the impact of the pandemic: (1) the re-adaptation of existing services provided by Latin American charities to meet community needs during and post-Covid-19; (2) the formation of new voluntary groups to address the immediate and short-term impacts of the pandemic; and (3) the mobilisation of advocacy groups and researchers to raise awareness about the inequalities faced by Latin Americans during Covid-19. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that new crises (re)produce both vulnerability and agency among migrant communities and highlights the key role that migrant-led community groups play in supporting migrants to access their rights in crisis situations. We conclude by emphasising the need to re-conceptualise migrants as both being positioned at the receiving end of crises and as agentic shapers of crises and their outcomes.

Classification: I14, I18

Keywords: crises, Covid-19, Latin Americans, London, Migrant-led organisations, civil society

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1. Introduction

The term “polycrisis” has become a popular metaphor to describe the state of global affairs (Henig & Knight, 2023). Polycrisis refers to “interwoven and overlapping crises [...] [the] complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrollable processes, and the general crisis of the planet” (Morin, 1999, p. 74, as cited in Henig & Knight, 2023, p. 3). In the European continent, this expression first appeared in a 2016 speech by then president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker to indicate how security fears, the so-called 2015 ‘refugee crisis’, and Britain’s vote to leave the EU were destabilising the continent (Henig & Knight, 2023). New global crises with consequences for the European continent have emerged since, including the international outbreak of Covid-19 in March 2020, the cost-of-living crisis starting in late 2021 and exacerbated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the worsening of the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan since 2021 and in Palestine and Lebanon since 2023.

Crises and mobility are interlinked phenomena. Crises produce economic, social, humanitarian, and cultural vulnerabilities, driving displacement and motivating individuals to seek better opportunities by crossing local, regional, or international borders (Castelli, 2018). Crises have profound consequences for migrant communities and families, including those who stay behind. For example, economic crises may affect not only migrants’ livelihoods, but also economic remittances (Ratha et al., 2023). Crises may also motivate migrants to return to their home countries or to onward migrate to new destinations (Mas Giralt, 2017; Turcatti, 2022).

While scholarship concerning the vulnerabilities that crises (re)produce for migrants and the individual coping strategies they deploy is growing, less attention is typically devoted to how migrants collectively cope in crisis situations. Examining the intersectional inequalities migrants face during crises is key to inform policy and practice on how to best mitigate these. Yet, it risks reproducing an understanding of migrants as victims, rather than agents devising collective responses to meet individual and broader community needs. This paper aims to highlight migrants’ collective agency in crisis situations by examining how Latin Americans in London mobilised their communities to address the impacts of Covid-19.

Latin Americans¹ have been migrating in larger numbers to the UK since the 1970s, (McIlwaine et al., 2011). Estimates indicate there were at least 450,000 migrants born in Central and South America in the UK by the end of 2020, with more than half residing in London (Turcatti & Vargas-Silva, 2022). Recent analysis of census data shows that between 2001 and 2021, there was a 406 percent increase in the Latin American born population in London (McIlwaine, 2024). However, Latin Americans are not institutionally recognised as an ethnic group (Lopez Zarzosa, 2021). Hence, the contributions they make and the inequalities they face tend to go unnoticed. In this context, Latin Americans in London typically rely on formal and informal Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) such as those led by and for Latin Americans for support (e.g.,

¹ Following McIlwaine et al. (2011), the category “Latin American migrants” is used to identify individuals who speak Spanish or Portuguese as their first language, were born in Mexico, Central America, South America, Cuba or the Dominican Republic, and left their country of origin after their eighteenth birthday. This term is problematic given its colonial origins, its pan-ethnic nature, and the fact that it excludes the children of Latin American migrants born outside the geographical areas identified above (Mas Giralt, 2011). Yet, it is used by London-based charities and groups supporting and advocating for the rights of migrants from the region (Turcatti, 2023).

registered charities, community and grassroots groups, and informal networks) (Medden, 2018; Turcatti, 2021; Pardo, 2018; Román-Velázquez & Retis, 2021).

To examine Latin Americans' community responses to Covid-19, this paper draws from fieldwork conducted between June 2020 and June 2023 for three projects: (1) a doctoral study exploring the experiences of 51 Colombian parents who onward migrated from Spain to London after the 2008 global financial crisis (Turcatti, 2023); (2) a participatory research project on the impact of Covid-19 and Brexit on 73 Latin Americans in London conducted in collaboration with the Latin American charity Latin American House (LAH) (Turcatti & Vargas-Silva, 2021); and (3) a mixed-methods evaluation of a new initiative established by the Latin American charity Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organization (IRMO) in the aftermath of Covid-19 to reduce barriers to healthcare (Rostron, 2023).

In what follows, we first review the literature on the role of CSOs in the lives of migrants, showing how CSOs have become important sources of social protection for migrants, independent of particular crises. We then focus on the UK context and discuss the forces that led to the growing importance of CSOs supporting migrants and refugees and how migrants have been actively participating in and leading CSOs. After presenting the methodology, we discuss the impacts of the pandemic on Latin American migrants in London and their community responses.

Our research shows that the pandemic exacerbated and made visible the inequalities Latin Americans were experiencing prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, while creating new ones. We identified three main Latin American-led community responses: (1) the re-adaptation of existing services provided by Latin American charities to meet community needs during and post Covid-19; (2) the formation of new informal, voluntary groups to address the short-term impact of the pandemic; and (3) the mobilisation of advocacy groups and researchers to raise awareness about the inequalities faced by Latin Americans during Covid-19.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that new crises (re)produce both vulnerability and agency among migrant communities and highlights the key role that both formal and informal migrant-led CSOs play in supporting migrants accessing their rights and essential services in crisis situations. We conclude by emphasising the need to re-conceptualise migrants as both being positioned at the receiving end of crises and as agentic shapers of their responses to crises and their outcomes.

2. Civil society and migrants' social protection

The World Bank defines civil society as “the wide array of non-governmental and not for profit organisations that have a presence in public life, express the interests and values of their members and others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations” (Cooper, 2018, pp. 6-7). Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) include formal and informal groups, such as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), registered charities, grassroots organisations, or informal networks of volunteers (Cooper, 2018). CSOs may operate at different levels (e.g., international, national, or local) and stand in “an autonomous

space beyond the family/kinship, the state and the market” (Padilla et al., 2022, p. 3). While CSOs may receive funding from government or the private sector, CSOs typically have a large degree of independence.

Drawing from a systematic review, Garkisch et al., (2017) outline a typology of the kind of services CSOs provide to migrants, and their descendants. These include basic services, capacity development, and advocacy (Table 1). While CSOs can specialise in one of these functions, they often provide a mix of these (Grove-White & Kaye, 2023). CSOs can also become spaces where migrants engage in transnational practices. For example, CSOs offer a place where migrants can gather to discuss the politics of their home country or celebrate cultural festivities (Morad & Della Puppa, 2019).

Table 1. Garkisch’s et al. (2017) typology of services CSOs provide to migrants, refugees, and their descendants (table made by the authors).

Service	Focus	Examples
Basic services	<i>Safety</i>	Physical protection and shelter from prosecution
	<i>Humanitarian aid</i>	Disaster relief, nutrition aid, shelter, immediate health services, collection and distribution of donations
	<i>Wellbeing activities</i>	Leisure activities, sports and cultural and religious services
	<i>Health services</i>	Subsidizing health insurances for migrants, health-care treatments for migrants, or providing in-house non-urgent medical care including psychological counselling
	<i>Social welfare</i>	Support with accommodation, translation and interpreting services, help accessing social services such as health or education
Capacity development	<i>Human development</i>	Language courses or educational programs
	<i>Economic development</i>	Provision of skill training or labour market orientation
	<i>Acculturation</i>	Cultural orientation to adapt to the receiving society
	<i>Social capital development</i>	Allowing migrants to volunteer so that they can create networks and bonds with local residents and other migrants that may benefit local integration outcomes
Advocacy	<i>Public</i>	Campaigns to raise awareness of migrants’ lived experiences among the general public

<i>Policial</i>	Campaigns to influence politics and policy makers in favour of migrants
<i>Legal</i>	Legal advice and workshops to inform migrants of their legal rights

In a 2013 report, the World Economic Forum observed “an explosion in the number of registrations of civil society organizations” (p. 6). The expansion of CSOs providing services to both locals and newcomers can be seen as a response to the emergence of neo-liberal states, whose core features include devolution of authority, privatisation, managerialism, and workfare (Benson, 2016). Since the 1980s, countries in the Global North have witnessed a reduction in public spending and state engagement in the provision of social services (Martinelli, 2017). This created gaps in social protection and welfare, which have been increasingly being filled by CSOs.

However, CSOs’ role in service provision varies across countries (Baglioni et al., 2022). CSOs play a stronger role in countries with *liberal welfare models*, such as the UK and the US, where the state plays a weak role in social service provision (Martinelli, 2017). CSOs are also particularly salient in countries with *familistic welfare models*, such as Italy and Spain, where the state plays a residual role in social assistance as families are expected to meet individuals’ welfare needs (Martinelli, 2017). In contrast, CSOs are less important social providers in countries with *social democratic welfare models*, such as Sweden or Denmark, where the state is the principal provider of social services (Martinelli, 2017).

In 2013, the World Economic Forum observed that “formally organized and more loosely networked civil society groups are increasingly involved in partnerships with governments and businesses and are engaged in official consultation processes of multilateral fora” (p. 7). This is true also for CSOs addressing the needs of migrants, and their descendants (Spencer & Delvino, 2018). In Europe and North America, central governments typically collaborate with large NGOs and intergovernmental organizations such as UNHCR to support voluntary returns, arrange the travel of refugees, or conduct search and rescue operations at sea, while local governments often collaborate with smaller CSOs to provide services to newly arrived migrants (Spencer & Delvino, 2018). Clearly, CSOs have become an important source of social protection for migrants, independently of particular crises. In the next section, we focus on the UK context, discuss the factors that led to the growth of CSOs supporting newly arrived migrants, and highlight how migrants, including Latin Americans, have been actively participating in and leading CSOs to address unmet needs in their communities.

3. Civil Society Organisations in the UK

The UK features a strong civil society providing services to migrants, and their descendants, also referred to as the UK migrant and refugee third sector (Grove-White & Kaye, 2023). This sector is a diverse ecosystem of formal and informal organisations (Grove-White & Kaye, 2023). Data from the charity commissions in England and Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland analysed by Grove-White and Kaye (2023) indicates that in 2022 there were 1,463 registered charities delivering some services to refugees and migrants though their remit was wider and 708 registered charities specifically focused on supporting newcomers. Yet, the sector's high degree of informality means it is difficult to assess its true size (Grove-White and Kaye, 2023).

The proliferation of CSOs providing essential services to newcomers in the UK has been driven by top-down forces. These include the move towards a liberal welfare model disengaging from direct welfare provision since the 1980s as well as the government's efforts to promote civil society initiatives, including via the *Compact on Relations between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector* in England introduced in 1998 and revised in 2010, and the 2011 *Localism Act* (Spencer & Delvino, 2018). The Compact aimed to foster a diverse and independent civil society and set standards for effective partnerships with the government (Spencer & Delvino, 2018). The 2011 Localism Act promoted the decentralisation of power away from central government by outlining new powers for local authorities and CSOs, with the latter acquiring the right to challenge how local authorities deliver social services and to bid to become service providers (Caruso et al., 2022; Local Government Association, n.d.).

In the UK, the growth in the number of CSOs providing essential services to newcomers is also a bottom-up response to an immigration and asylum system in crisis (Grove-White & Kaye, 2023). The UK "hostile environment" created new challenges for newcomers. First used by then Home Secretary Theresa May in 2012 to refer to policies conceived to make the life of undocumented migrants in the UK harder in order to disincentivise irregular migration, this term has come to indicate all those measures restricting newcomers' access to essential services (e.g., healthcare, education, employment, public services, or bank accounts) and embedding immigration enforcement in local communities (e.g., employers or landlords are legally required to check immigration status) (Grove-White and Kaye, 2023). The UK asylum system is in crisis too. Asylum seekers in the UK are criminalised, face destitution and long waiting times to have their asylum claims processed, while struggling to access legal representation all without the right to claim to public funds (Yeo, 2023; Wilding, 2023).

CSOs have emerged as safety nets for newcomers affected not only by the dynamics discussed above, but also by other crises, including Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis since late 2021 exacerbated by depleted gas supplies in Europe, disruptions to global supply chains, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Hourston, 2022; Grove-White & Kaye, 2023). From 2020 to 2022, Grove-White and Kaye (2023) observed a 24% increase in the number of registered charities across the UK specifically focused on refugee and migration issues. Grove-White and Kaye (2023) explained this growth as the sector's response to the humanitarian crises in Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Hong Kong, which led to new arrivals from these regions.

Analysis of CSOs providing services to newcomers does not always recognise migrants' leadership in civil society efforts. For some, this represents a form of victimisation and erasure as migrants' agency in advocating for their rights and collectively mobilising to promote the welfare of their communities is discounted (Turcatti, 2021; Bassel & Emejulu, 2017). Drawing from Page and Petray's (2016), we understand agency as "the capability of individual or collective actors to do something in the social realm, contributing to a process of making and remaking [...] larger social and cultural formations" (p. 89). Agency does not mean being unconstrained or unaffected by structural inequalities. Instead, agents "can undertake action through the very structures which constrain them, reproducing or changing those structures in creative ways" (Page & Petray, 2016, p. 89).

In the UK, migrants' civil society leadership dates back at least to the 1950s with new arrivals from the ex-British colonies in the Caribbean who began establishing "diaspora groups, supplementary schools, advice clinics and other services geared to meeting the needs of communities [...] badly served by mainstream public authorities" (Voice4Change, 2015, p. 7). In the 1970s, newly arrived South Asian migrants also started to set up formal and informal CSOs addressing needs in their communities (Voice4Change, 2015). Migrant-led CSOs have been instrumental in supporting migrants during times of crisis, such as the economic downturn of the 1980s and the global 2008 crisis, despite facing several structural inequalities, including less access to funding compared to mainstream CSOs (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017; Voice4Change, 2015; FREA, 2023)

Latin Americans have further diversified London's civil society since the late 1970s and early 1980s, when arrivals from the region started to increase (Pardo, 2018). Latin Americans established several cultural and diasporic formal and informal organisations as well as charities (Roman-Velazquez, 2014; Turcatti, 2021; Pardo, 2018). These Latin American CSOs play a particularly important role since the UK Government has still not included the category "Latin American" in the British Ethnic Recognition Scheme used by institutions such the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to understand and tackling the inequalities faced by ethnic minorities (Rostron, 2023). As a result, Latin Americans in London heavily rely on Latin American CSOs for support (Medden, 2018; Turcatti, 2021; Pardo, 2018; Román-Velázquez & Retis, 2021). In this paper, we examine how Latin Americans in London mobilised their communities, including existing Latin American CSOs, to address the impact of Covid-19.

4. Methodology

This paper draws from fieldwork conducted between June 2020 and June 2023 for three research projects:

- 1) A doctoral study by the first author exploring the experiences of Colombian families who migrated to Spain in the early 2000s and then onward migrated to London after the 2008 financial crisis (Turcatti, 2023). While Covid-19 was not the main focus of the doctoral study, it was a primary concern for the 51 Colombian parents interviewed as fieldwork was conducted between June 2020 to May 2021. Conducted mostly online due to lockdowns and mobility restrictions, fieldwork also included interviews with 39 community workers, primarily staff and volunteers from London-based Latin American CSOs (both formal organisations such as registered charities and informal community groups by and for Latin American parents), as well as participant observations in the online activities and webinars organised by Latin American CSOs. These activities, predominantly conducted in Spanish, generated important data on the impact of the pandemic on London's Latin American migrants and on Latin American-led community responses to Covid-19.
- 2) A research project led by the first author and Professor Carlos Vargas-Silva at the Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS) on the impact of Covid-19 and Brexit on 73 Latin Americans in London, conducted in collaboration with the Latin American charity Latin American House (LAH) (Turcatti & Vargas-Silva, 2021). Funded by the University of Oxford's Public Engagement with Research Seed Fund, the project was participatory in nature as LAH staff drove the decision-making concerning the research focus, questions, data collection, and dissemination strategies. Data was collected by the first author and one of the charity's staff members in Spanish via online focus groups and online interviews. Data analysis was conducted by the first author and then discussed with LAH staff who provided feedback. This project shed important insights on the impact of the pandemic on Latin American migrants and how they organised through informal and formal CSOs to support each other during Covid-19.
- 3) A mixed-methods evaluation of *The Health and Wellbeing Initiative*—an intervention introduced in 2020 in response to the Covid-19 crisis by the London-based Latin American charity Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO) (Rostron, 2023). The evaluation was funded by the Impact on Urban Health via IRMO and led by the second author at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR). IRMO'S *Health and Wellbeing Initiative* was conceived to support Latin Americans to overcome barriers to access healthcare by providing one-to-one tailored support, social media engagement, outreach events, and information on health-related issues, such as Covid-19 vaccines, cervical cancer screening, or HIV prevention and treatments. The mixed-methods evaluation was conducted between May and June 2023 and explored the perspectives of the *Health and Wellbeing Initiative*'s service users in order to assess how the intervention was experienced. This involved a survey of 48 service users, semi-structured interviews with 5 service users, informal conversations with IRMO staff, including the director and project managers, and a review of IRMO's

internal progress reports. This paper draws from this evaluation as it provides an important case study on how Latin American charities organised to meet community needs during Covid-19.

In terms of ethics, the doctoral study and the participatory research project received ethical approval from the University of Oxford's School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography Research Ethics Committee. The evaluation study received ethical approval from the NIESR Research Ethics Committee. The three projects complied with the principles of anonymity, confidentiality, and the principle of do no harm. During the research, we were aware of sensitive topics related to migrating to the UK, including experiencing exclusion and racism. We aimed to avoid harm by actively looking out for discomfort and pausing or stopping interviews when necessary, in addition to standard ethical guarantees of anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent and the right to withdraw.

The next section presents the findings. All the names appearing in the findings are pseudonymous to protect the anonymity of the participants, except for the names of the charities IRMO and LAH as our collaborations with these organisations were made public. Quotes in the findings were translated from Spanish to English. As a native Spanish speaker, the second author handled the translations in her research. Since Spanish is not the first author's mother tongue, she sought feedback from LAH staff and her doctorate supervisor, who are native Spanish speakers.

5. London's Latin American community navigating Covid-19

The World Health Organisation declared Covid-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020). As the first cases of Covid-19 emerged, measures such as social distancing, national lockdowns and remote work were introduced to stop infection worldwide. In the UK, the first lockdown measures were introduced on 23 March 2020, with the last national lockdown ending on 19 July 2021 (Institute for Government, 2021a). In the UK, ethnic minorities were disproportionately more affected by Covid-19 than white British people (Oskrochi, 2023). The former were more likely to be infected and to die once infected (ONS, 2020; Platt & Warwick, 2020). Ethnic minorities were also more economically vulnerable and more likely to work in "non-essential" sectors such as hospitality or leisure (Platt & Warwick, 2020; Cheshmehzangi, 2021).

Research on the experiences of Latin Americans in London during the pandemic shows how on an economic level many experienced the impact of cuts in income and redundancies, particularly those in low-paid and precarious jobs (Lopez Zarzosa, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, the average annual salary for Latin Americans living in London was 22 per cent lower than the UK average, and a quarter worked in low-paid jobs such as caring, cleaning and hospitality (McIlwaine, Camilo & Linneker, 2011; McIlwaine & Bunge, 2016). Therefore, the closure of non-essential sectors during the pandemic was particularly detrimental for Latin Americans in London (Lopez Zarzosa, 2021).

During the pandemic, services such as education and healthcare had to be accessed online. Latin Americans with limited English skills and those affected by the digital divide struggled to register children to school, access emergency Covid-19 support such as the furlough scheme, as well as registering with and accessing the GP (Lopez Zarzosa, 2021; Turcatti & Vargas-Silva, 2021; GOV.UK, 2020). Issues such as inadequate housing conditions, including overcrowding, also had profound implications for the health of Latin America migrants, as they heightened the risk of Covid-19 infection (Lopez Zarzosa, 2021).

Additionally, changes to the rights for European migrants in the UK following the UK withdrawal from the European Union, otherwise known as Brexit, affected Latin Americans with European passports, acquired through descent or by naturalising in Southern Europe prior to moving to the UK (Turcatti and Vargas Silva, 2022). Between 30 March 2019 and 30 June 2021, European passport holders living in the UK had to register for the EU settlement scheme (EUSS), a programme developed by the British Government to allow EU nationals residing in the UK to maintain residence as part of the Brexit process. Latin Americans faced several challenges to apply for the EUSS, including misinformation, digital exclusion, and language barriers (Turcatti and Vargas Silva, 2022). These were exacerbated by Covid-19, increasing the risk of becoming undocumented among Latin Americans residing in the UK with European passports (Turcatti and Vargas Silva, 2022).

The combination of all these challenges underscores the complex and intersecting impact of the pandemic on the lives of Latin Americans. In London, Latin Americans mobilised their communities to address these challenges. We identified three main types of Latin American-led community responses: (1) the re-adaptation of existing services provided by Latin American charities to meet community needs during and post-Covid-19; (2) the formation of new informal, voluntary groups to address the immediate and short-term impacts of the pandemic; (3) the mobilisation of advocacy groups and researchers to raise awareness about the inequalities faced by Latin Americans during Covid-19.

5.1 Latin American charities re-adapting services

After the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK faced the dual challenge of halting widespread infection through lockdowns while ensuring the continued provision of essential services. Temporary crisis accommodation was provided for rough sleepers (London Council, 2020). Schools were forced to close and adapt to online learning. Primary healthcare services were provided through online and video-consultations (Institute for Government, 2021b). However, these responses did not always address the needs of Latin Americans. For example, Lopez Zarzosa (2021) observed that local authorities in London were not translating official Covid-19 hygiene measures into Spanish and Portuguese. Latin American charities stepped in to fill in this gap in service provision during the pandemic (Turcatti, 2023; Turcatti & Vargas-Silva, 2022; Rostron, 2023), highlighting the key role of migrant-led CSOs in addressing migrants' needs when unexpected crises arise.

Latin American charities in London were already providing important services before the pandemic such as support accessing education and employment (Turcatti, 2021). Following

Covid-19, these charities had to rethink and adapt their service provision. We found that they quickly shifted their services from face-to-face to online platforms, ensuring the continuity of education, employment, housing, and cultural support for the Latin American community. For example, Latin American charities began running information sessions on a variety of topics, including on employment rights and registration procedures for children in primary and secondary schools, as online webinars via Zoom instead of as in-person events. Recognising the digital gap impacting specific demographics, Latin American charities started offering digital skills training via WhatsApp on how to use digital platforms such as Zoom.

Furthermore, Latin American charities took proactive measures to expand their outreach and continue to provide one-to-one advice on a range of matters, including on how to access welfare benefits, the furlough scheme, or individualised support to register to the EUSS. They would check in on their vulnerable beneficiaries to understand what their needs were and would then provide individualised support, assistance, and advice over the phone, via WhatsApp, or Zoom, depending on the digital literacy of their beneficiaries. This demonstrates migrant-led CSOs' commitment to maintaining a connection with the community during crises as well as their adaptability to address emerging needs.

Latin American charities not only re-adapted their services but also created new ones to address the impact of the pandemic on Latin Americans in London. For example, as the Covid-19 situation progressed, IRMO recognized the necessity for a more focused initiative centred around health. Leveraging their connections with local authorities, IRMO secured funding to launch the *Health and Wellbeing Initiative*. This new initiative allowed the charity to broaden their health-related service offerings, including providing tailored health-related assistance for individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds, organizing webinars on Covid-19 and other health-related issues such as cervical screening, and providing interpreters to their clients attending Covid-19 vaccination centres.

The evaluation of the Health and Wellbeing Initiative conducted by the second author (Rostron, 2023) highlights the significant impact of this new service. IRMO regularly updated over 2,000 Latin Americans on the Covid-19 vaccine and other salient healthcare topics through WhatsApp broadcast lists. They also counted over 145,000 views on informative posts shared on their social media channels and relating to the Covid-19 vaccine and access to healthcare services. Furthermore, IRMO supported over 2,200 Latin Americans as part of their outreach and online workshops. The evaluation of the Health and Wellbeing Initiative included interviews with Latin Americans to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Interviewees felt that IRMO's initiative had offered them a platform to share their thoughts and feel heard. This was the case for Ricardo, who "spent two or three hours talking [to IRMO staff and volunteers]" when he visited IRMO's walk-in health service. Others perceived the services provided under the *Health and Wellbeing Initiative* to be inclusive. Carmen, who approached IRMO due to an issue with a medical prescription, felt that the staff "don't judge based on your social class or race; everyone is treated equally, as it should be". Victor, who came seeking advice on the Covid-19 vaccine, felt that "everyone at IRMO, from the receptionists to the one-on-one sessions, is incredibly welcoming".

Overall, these findings suggest that migrant-led CSOs play a crucial role not only in delivering essential services to address unmet needs among migrant populations (Bassel & Emejulu,

2017; Grove-White & Kaye, 2023), but also in crisis scenarios, where their ability to innovate and quickly adapt to challenges proves invaluable.

5.2 Latin American-led grassroots organising

So far, we have highlighted the key role of Latin American charities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our fieldwork reveals that Latin American migrants other than the staff of Latin American charities also took leadership to address the impact of Covid-19 in their communities by establishing new voluntary groups or grassroots campaigns. For example, during the research collaboration with Latin American House (Turcatti & Vargas-Silva, 2021), we interviewed a Colombian woman in her thirties who took the initiative with a friend to create a food bank that had “no filters” by partnering with a faith organisation:

Everything began in March [2020]. We created a community kitchen in a faith community. Through the Latin American church, we had the possibility to bring and gather food [...] The food bank was working on a fortnight basis for six months and it was an enormous collective effort. [...] One of the principles of the community kitchen was that there was no filter. I mean, whether you were irregular, you were receiving benefits... We wouldn't say “no, if you receive benefits, you cannot access food”. We... there was no filter.

Other Latin American migrants independently forged partnerships with established CSOs to gain institutional support and increase the visibility of their campaigns. For example, the first author interviewed a Colombian secondary school teacher who led a campaign to bridge the digital divide faced by her Latin American students, which was preventing them from accessing online schooling during the lockdowns. The campaign called for volunteers to donate spare laptops and tablets which were then delivered door-to-door by the teacher to her Latin American students. Put bluntly by the teacher during an interview held in Summer 2020:

If we are going online, then the students need to be prepared and they need to have everything to support that learning. What's the point in saying we're going online if they can't go online?

To enhance the success of this campaign, the teacher partnered with an established CSO operating in the teacher's local council and which advocates for the rights of various social groups, including but not limited to those of ethnic minorities and migrant communities. This enhanced the visibility of the campaign among the council's local residents.

These examples of leadership of Latin American migrants unaffiliated with Latin American charities show that migrant-led grassroots initiatives can be as important as the support

provided by formal migrant-led CSOs during crisis situations. They are also a reminder of the agency of individual migrants who can map and mobilise institutional actors, including formal CSOs such as churches or registered charities, to address inequalities when unexpected crises emerge.

5.3 Latin American-led mobilisation of advocacy groups and researchers

Latin American-led community responses to Covid-19 also included the mobilisation of various of actors to raise awareness about the inequalities within their communities during the pandemic. This is significant due to the lack of institutional recognition of Latin Americans as an ethnic group and shows the important advocacy role that migrant-led CSOs can play, beyond direct assistance and service provision.

First, Latin American charities mobilised their existing networks to make visible the needs of Latin Americans during Covid-19. For example, they mobilised the Coalition of Latin American UK (CLAUK), which comprises 13 Latin American charities, including IRMO and LAH, who work collectively to raise awareness of the issues facing Latin Americans in the UK. In 2020, CLAUK compiled evidence from academic literature and the frontline experiences of their member charities to highlight the difficulties encountered by Latin Americans employed in precarious positions within the cleaning industry during Covid-19. This resulted in a report describing the job insecurity, unsafe working conditions, and instances of dismissal or exploitation that Latin American cleaners were experiencing during the pandemic. This evidence was submitted to and included in the UK Parliament's report by the Women and Equalities Committee (2020) on the unequal health impact of the pandemic on ethnic minorities. By submitting this evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee, CLAUK urged for the official recognition and consideration of the challenges faced by Latin Americans during the committees' reflections of the unequal impact of Covid-19 on ethnic minorities.

Latin American charities also mobilised researchers within their communities to produce evidence to inform their advocacy. One example is IRMO's research briefing on the impact of Covid-19 on Latin Americans (Lopez Zarzosa, 2021). This report encapsulated Latin Americans' experiences during this particular moment, not only for future pandemic preparedness but also to address broader inequalities in areas such as housing, education, work, and access to care. It called for action to recognize Latin Americans as an ethnic group, ensuring their consideration in public health and civil goals, such as vaccination efforts.

Furthermore, Latin American CSOs collaborated with academic researchers. For example, LAH recognized the necessity for research addressing the experiences of Latin Americans in London during Covid-19 and Brexit. LAH sought COMPAS to conduct this research for two main reasons. Firstly, LAH did not have the resources to lead on research activities due to the high demand for its services. Secondly, LAH believed that research conducted by university researchers not associated with the charity would enhance the credibility of the findings in the eyes of key stakeholders, such as local authorities and funders, with whom LAH collaborates. The study's research questions, design, and outputs were co-developed with LAH staff. This was important to ensure that the aims and findings would inform their work. These findings

highlighted the areas where Latin Americans were “left behind” and how their lack of recognition exacerbated barriers to access to essential support (Turcatti & Vargas-Silva, 2021). LAH used the insights from this research to effectively raise awareness regarding the needs of their beneficiaries amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic by strategically disseminating these findings.

6. Conclusion

By examining how the Latin American community of London mobilised to address the impact of Covid-19, this paper contributes to the literature examining the nexus between migration and crises. We have argued that the pandemic exacerbated and made visible the health, social, and economic inequalities Latin Americans were experiencing prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, while simultaneously creating new ones. We identified three main types of Latin American-led community responses to mitigate the impact of the pandemic: (1) the re-adaptation of existing services provided by Latin American charities to meet community needs during and post-Covid-19; (2) the formation of new voluntary groups to address the immediate and short-term impacts of the pandemic; and (3) the mobilisation of advocacy groups and researchers to raise awareness about the inequalities faced by Latin Americans during Covid-19. The community responses described are not meant to act as a typology of how migrants collectively mobilise to cope with emerging crises. Instead, they are intended to demonstrate how new crises (re)produce both vulnerability and agency among migrant communities.

Our paper also builds on and contributes to the literature on the role CSOs play in migrants' lives. In particular, it foregrounds the key role that migrant-led CSOs play during crisis situations. Specifically, our findings highlighted how Latin American charities stepped in to fill gap in service provision during Covid-19 while taking proactive measures to maintain a connection with their beneficiaries and to adapt their services to address new needs created by the Covid-19 crisis. Overall, these findings suggest that migrant-led CSOs play a crucial role not only in delivering essential services to address unmet needs among migrant populations (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017; Turcatti, 2021), but also in crisis scenarios, where their ability to innovate and quickly adapt to challenges proves invaluable.

Our findings also discussed examples of leadership of Latin American migrants unaffiliated with formal CSOs, who took proactive measures to address the impact of the pandemic in the community. These findings are important as they show that migrant-led grassroots initiatives can be as crucial as the support provided by formal migrant-led CSOs such as registered charities during crisis situations. They are also a reminder of the agency of individual migrants who can map and mobilise institutional actors, including formal CSOs such as churches or registered charities, to address inequalities when unexpected crises emerge.

Ultimately, this paper emphasises the need to re-conceptualise migrants as both being positioned at the receiving end of crises and as agentic shapers of their responses to crises and their outcomes. At the time of writing, several crises continue to co-exist, driving displacement and impacting migrants and their families in the UK, in Europe, and globally. While research examining the intersectional inequalities migrants face during crises is crucial to inform policy

and practice on how to best mitigate these, it is equally vital to understand how migrants are mobilising to respond to these crises in order to not discount migrants' agency and to devise policies that can support these migrant-led efforts.

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